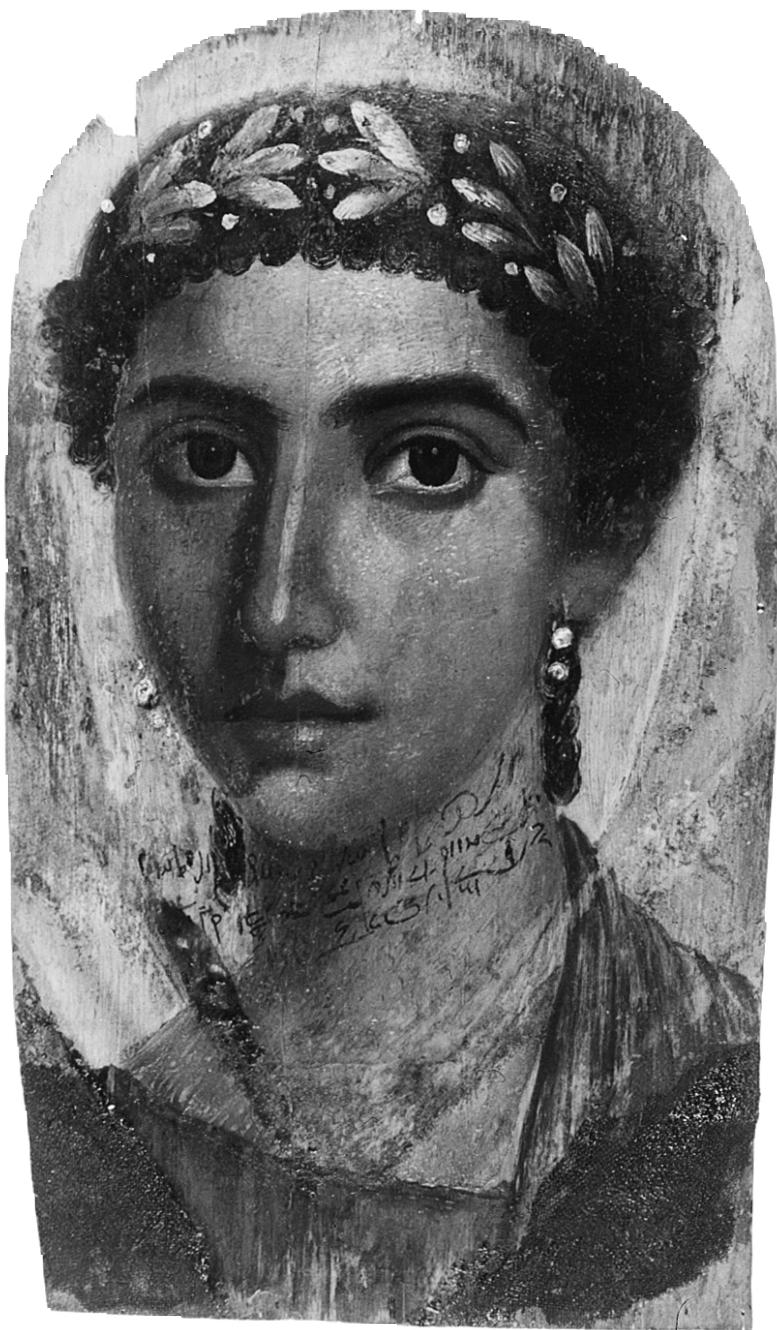


## Women and society in Greek and Roman Egypt

A sourcebook

A wealth of evidence for the lives of ordinary men and women – from texts (including personal letters) written on papyrus and other materials to objects of everyday use and funerary portraits – has survived from the Graeco-Roman period of Egyptian history. But much of this unparalleled resource has been available only to specialists because of the difficulty of reading and interpreting it. Now eleven leading scholars in this field have collaborated to make available to students and other non-specialists a selection of over three hundred texts translated from Greek, Latin and Egyptian, as well as more than fifty illustrations, documenting the lives of women within this society, from queens to priestesses, property-owners to slave-girls, from birth through motherhood to death. Each item is accompanied by full explanatory notes and bibliographical references.

Jane Rowlandson is Lecturer in Ancient History at King's College London and the author of *Landowners and Tenants in Roman Egypt: The Social Relations of Agriculture in the Oxyrhynchite Nome* (1996).



Mummy portrait of Eirene

# Women and society in Greek and Roman Egypt

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A sourcebook

Edited by  
JANE ROWLANDSON

with the collaboration of  
Roger Bagnall, Alan Bowman, Willy Clarysse,  
Ann Ellis Hanson, Deborah Hobson, James Keenan,  
Peter van Minnen, Dominic Rathbone,  
Dorothy J. Thompson, and Terry Wilfong



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# Contents

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List of maps	vii
List of figures	vii
List of plates	vii
Preface	ix
Acknowledgements	xi
Abbreviations	xii
Notes for the reader	xiv
Glossary	xvii
 <b>I Introduction</b>	
1 The purpose of this book	I
2 Greek and Roman Egypt: historical background	3
3 The nature of the source material	18
 <b>2 Royalty and religion</b>	
Introduction	24
I Ptolemaic Queens (1–15)	25
II Roman Imperial women (16–20)	41
III Goddesses (21–26)	46
IV Priestesses (27–36)	55
V Religion and the Individual (37–48)	62
VI Christianity (49–68)	70
 <b>3 Family matters</b>	
Introduction	84
I Perspectives on the family (69–75)	87
II Archives	
A. The archive of Zenon, Philadelphia (76–77)	95
B. The Serapeum archive, Memphis (78–83)	98
C. The archive of Dryton and Apollonia alias Senmonthis, Pathyris (84–87)	105
D. The archive of Tryphon, Oxyrhynchos (88–91)	112
E. The archive of Apollonios the strategos and Aline (92–99)	118
F. The archive of Kronion, farmer of Tebtynis, and his family (100–103)	125

G.	The archive of Taesion/Taesis (104–105)	133
H.	The archive of Gaius Julius Niger (106–107)	139
J.	The archive of Saturnila and her sons (108–110)	143
K.	The archive of Paniskos and Ploutogenia, Philadelphia (111–115)	147
L.	The archive of Flavius Dioskoros, Aphrodite (116–117)	151
<b>4</b>	<b>Status and law</b>	
	Introduction	155
I	The Egyptian background (118–121)	156
II	Greek and Egyptian in a colonial society (122–130)	162
III	Roman transformations (131–144)	174
IV	Freedom and responsibility in developed Roman society (145–156)	195
V	Continuity and change in the Coptic texts (157–161)	212
<b>5</b>	<b>Economic activities</b>	
	Introduction	218
I	Women and agricultural land (162–181)	218
II	Women in the non-agricultural economy (182–217)	245
<b>6</b>	<b>Being female</b>	
	Introduction	280
I	Birth, infancy and childhood (218–235)	282
II	Education (236–246)	299
III	Marriage and married life (247–263)	312
IV	Sickness, death and burial (264–279)	335
V	Weaklings or viragos? The ambiguities of womanhood (280–289)	354
	List and concordance of texts	369
	Bibliography	382
	Index	398

# Maps

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1	Egypt in the Graeco-Roman Period	<i>page</i> xix
2	The Arsinoite nome (Fayum)	xx
3	The Eastern Mediterranean	xxi

# Figures

---

1	Family of Taous alias Heriobastis	58
2	Family of Dryton and Apollonia alias Senmonthis	106
3	Family of Tryphon and Thamounis/Thamounion	113
4	Family of Apollonios and Aline	120
5	Family of Kronion and Taorsenouphis	126
6	Family of Gaius Julius Niger and Ptollois	141
7	Family of Flavius Dioskoros	152

# Plates

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## Frontispiece: Mummy portrait of Eirene

Portrait of a young woman, dressed in a vermillion mantle over a green tunic, wearing hooped earrings decorated with pearls and crowned with a wreath of gold leaves and berries. Her hairstyle, with close curls and curled tresses behind her ears, suggests a date in the mid-first century AD, although the earrings and dress may point to the reign of Trajan (see Walker and Bierbrier, 1997, cat. 111). The strongly Greek style of portraiture contrasts with the inscription in Egyptian Demotic script across her neck, which appears to read: 'Eirene, daughter of Silvanus, whose mother is Senpnoutis. May her soul rise before Osiris-Sokar, the great god, lord of Abydos, for ever' (cf. **6.279(b)**). The subject's name is rendered in Demotic 'Hrn', which possibly represents Greek 'Helene' rather than 'Eirene'. Her father's name, if correctly read as 'Silvanus' (Slwns), is Roman, supporting the later of the possible dates. Traces of bitumen imprinted with linen cloth show where the portrait on its wooden panel was inserted into the mummy wrappings. See also Borg (1996), 30, 151.

1	Arsinoe II (silver dekadrachm)	27
2	Arsinoe II (relief, temple of Isis, Philae)	29
3	Berenike II (faience oinochoe)	30

4	Kleopatra VII (votive relief)	38
5	Kleopatra VII and Caesarion (relief, temple of Hathor, Dendera)	38
6	Kleopatra VII and Antony (silver tetradrachm)	39
7	Bust of Livia	42
8	The goddess Taweret (Thoeris)	47
9	Statuettes of Sekhmet and Bastet (Boubastis)	48
10	Augustus and Isis (detail, the Kalabsha Gate)	50
11	Isis and Harpokrates (wall painting)	51
12	Marble statue of Isis	52
13	Clay figurine	70
14	Mother and child (stela)	71
15	Horoscope	114
16	Amulet of Isis and Harpokrates	129
17	Karanis: house of Taesion, showing letters as discovered	132
18	Karanis: plan of excavations	133
19	Karanis: plan of area G	134
20	Karanis: detailed plan of block with House B <sub>1</sub>	135
21	Karanis: view of street with steps leading into House B <sub>1</sub>	136
22	Karanis, area C: views and plan	137
23	Karanis: items found in House 5006	139
24	Karanis: children's toys	140
25	Dionysias: plan of the bath-house	173
26	Tomb of Petosiris: harvesting scene	219
27	Rent receipt in handwriting of Aurelia Charite	242
28	Statuettes of Aphrodite-Isis	258
29	'Coptic' textile depicting female dancers	278
30	Letter of Thermouthas to Valerias	285
31	Relief scene of the divine birth of Horos, Edfu	287
32	Hieroglyph denoting birth	288
33	Egyptian birth stools	288
34	Mummy portrait: Hermione	300
35	Statue of woman holding book roll	301
36	The handwriting of Sentia Asklatarion, a 'slow writer'	302
37	A school exercise	308
38	Mummy portrait of a young woman	314
39	Items of jewellery	315
40	Marriage agreement of Thais	323
41	Letter of Thermouthis to Nemesion	326
42	Mummy of woman, with grave goods and painted plaque	336
43	Wall paintings from tomb 21, Tuna el-Gebel	337
44	Book of the Dead: Judgement scene	338
45	Grave monument for Sarapous	349
46	Grave monument for two women and a girl	350
47	Mummy portraits of a woman and children	351
48	Mummy label on linen	353
49	Uterine amulet	359



# Preface

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This sourcebook originated from an idea of Deborah Hobson to make available to non-specialists some of the extraordinary range of evidence for women's lives in Graeco-Roman Egypt. In the making, it has grown in length and complexity. The editorial material and bibliographical references may, it is hoped, be of use to readers capable of reading Greek sources in the original, as well as to those completely dependent on the translations.

All eleven contributors have collaborated closely on its construction, criticising one another's work at every stage. Deborah Hobson coordinated the earlier stages of assembly until administrative responsibilities obliged her to withdraw from her editorial role. Each main chapter was initially compiled by a pair of contributors: Chapter 2, Dominic Rathbone and Dorothy Thompson; Chapters 3 and 6, Ann Hanson and Peter van Minnen; Chapter 4, Roger Bagnall and Jim Keenan; and Chapter 5, Alan Bowman and myself; I also drafted Chapter 1. The texts in Egyptian were provided by Willy Clarysse (Demotic) and Terry Wilfong (Coptic), with additional contributions by John Baines and W. John Tait. For most of the completed text, it would be impossible to identify a single author, but each chapter retains a distinctive 'flavour' imparted by the initial compilers, despite the later additions, alterations and rearrangements of material.

We have also received assistance or advice from many other colleagues, including Antti Arjava, Sally-Ann Ashton, Jean Bingen, Euphrosyne Doxiadis, Bernard Gredley, Michael Sharp, Michael Trapp, and Susan Walker. To these, and to John Baines and John Tait for their help with the Egyptian texts, we are immensely grateful. Girton College Publications Fund generously contributed towards the cost of illustrations for chapter 2. Finally, I must add my personal thanks to the other contributors, whose expertise, on which I have frequently drawn during my editorial work, has enriched my own understanding of Graeco-Roman Egypt. The book's remaining shortcomings are my responsibility.

Jane Rowlandson



# Acknowledgements

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Musées Royaux d'Arts et d'Histoire, Brussels      Plates 9, 44  
The Egyptian Museum, Cairo      Plates 33(a), 36  
The Syndics, Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge      Plates 1, 6, 8  
The Mistress and Fellows, Girton College, Cambridge      Plate 34  
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Euphrosyne Doxiadis      Plate 39  
Machteld Mellink      Plate 3

# Abbreviations

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Full details of works cited by author and date may be found in the Bibliography. Most ancient texts are cited by their standard abbreviations: for papyri and related works, see J. F. Oates et al., *Checklist of Editions of Greek and Latin Papyri, Ostraca and Tablets*, fourth edn (BASP Supp. 7, 1992), available on the internet: <http://scriptorium.lib.duke.edu/papyrus/texts/clist.html>. The *Checklist* also lists (pp. 88–9) the full details of the Proceedings of the International Congresses of Papyrology. Abbreviations used for periodicals may also be found in the *Checklist* (76–8), or in *L'Année Philologique* (Paris, 1927– ). For editions of Greek inscriptions, see *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum* (Leiden, 1923– ), or e.g. Austin (1981).

In addition, the following abbreviations are used:

Äg.Abh.	Ägyptologische Abhandlungen.
CEML	F. Baratte and B. Boyaval, 'Catalogue des étiquettes de momies du Musée du Louvre', <i>CRIPEL</i> 2 (1974), 155–264 (nos. 1–259); 3 (1975), 151–261 (nos. 260–688); 4 (1976), 173–254 (nos. 689–999); 5 (1977), 237–339 (nos. 1000–1209).
Ep	W. E. Crum and H. G. Evelyn White (eds.), <i>The Monastery of Epiphanius at Thebes, Part II: Coptic Ostraca and Papyri; Greek Ostraca and Papyri</i> (New York, 1926).
Heitsch	E. Heitsch, <i>Die griechischen Dichterfragmente der römischen Kaiserzeit</i> vol. 1 (2nd. edn, Göttingen, 1963).
I.Alex.	F. Kayser, <i>Recueil des inscriptions grecques et latines (non funéraires) d'Alexandrie impériale (I<sup>er</sup>–III<sup>e</sup> s. apr. J.-C.)</i> (Cairo, 1994).
I.Fay.	E. Bernand, <i>Recueil des inscriptions grecques du Fayoum</i> vols. 1–III (Leiden–Cairo, 1975–81).
IGA v	G. Lefebvre (ed.), <i>Inscriptiones Graecae Aegypti v. Inscriptiones Christianae Aegypti</i> (Cairo, 1907; repr. Chicago, 1978).
I.Memnon	A. and E. Bernand, <i>Les inscriptions grecques et latines du colosse de Memnon</i> (IFAO: Bibliothèque d'Etude 31; Cairo, 1960).
I.Métr.	E. Bernand, <i>Inscriptions métriques de l'Égypte gréco-romaine</i> (Annales littéraires de l'Université de Besançon 98; Paris, 1969).
I.Port.	A. Bernand, <i>Les portes du désert: Recueil des inscriptions grecques d'Antinooupolis, Tentyris, Koptos, Apollonopolis Parva et Apollonopolis Magna</i> (Paris, 1984).
KRU	W. E. Crum and G. Steindorff (eds.), <i>Koptische Rechtsurkunden des achten Jahrhunderts aus Djême (Theben)</i> (Leipzig, 1912).

- Mertens-Pack<sup>3</sup> M.-H. Marganne and P. Mertens, 'Medici et Medica, 2<sup>o</sup> édition', in I. Andorlini (ed.), 'Specimina' per il Corpus dei Papiri Greci di Medicina (Florence, 1997).
- New Primer P. W. Pestman, *The New Papyrological Primer* (2nd edn, revised, Leiden, 1994).
- OMH E. Stefanski and M. Lichtheim, *Coptic Ostraca from Medinet Habu* (Oriental Institute Publications 71; Chicago, 1952).
- Pack<sup>2</sup> *The Greek and Latin Literary Texts from Greco-Roman Egypt* (2nd edn, Ann Arbor, 1965).
- P.Cairo dem. see Spiegelberg (1906–8).
- P.Count. W. Clarysse and D. J. Thompson, *Counting the People* (forthcoming).
- PDM Demotic Magical Papyri, as translated in Betz (1992).
- PGM K. Preisendanz (ed.), *Papyri Graecae Magicae*, 2 vols. (revised by A. Heinrichs; Stuttgart, 1973–4).
- P.Kellis K. A. Worp et al. (eds.), *Greek Papyri from Kellis I (P.Kell.G.)* (Oxbow Monograph 54; Oxford, 1995).
- P.Lond.dem. iv C. A. R. Andrews, *Catalogue of Demotic Papyri in the British Museum* vol. iv, *Legal texts from the Theban area* (London, 1990).
- P.Lond.Lit. H. J. M. Milne (ed.), *Catalogue of Literary Papyri in the British Museum* (London, 1927).
- P.Oxf. Griffith E. Bresciani, *L'Archivio demotico del tempio di Soknopaiou Nesos nel Griffith Institute Oxford*, 1 (Testi e documenti per lo Studio dell'Antichità 49; Milan, 1975).
- P.Tor.Botti G. Botti, *L'Archivio demotico da Deir el-Medineh* (Florence, 1967).
- Pros.Ptol. E. Peremans, E. Van't Dack et al., *Prosopographia Ptolemaica* vols. 1–IX (Louvain, 1950–81).
- Rec.dém.biling. P. W. Pestman, J. Quaegebeur and R. L. Vos, *Recueil de textes démotiques et bilingues* (Leiden, 1977).
- SAK *Studien zur altägyptischen Kultur* (Hamburg, 1974– ).
- Tab.Vindol. II A. K. Bowman and J. D. Thomas, *The Vindolanda Writing Tablets (Tabulae Vindolandenses II)* (London, 1994).

# Notes for the reader

---

## Transliteration of words and names

This book is intended primarily for readers who do not know ancient Greek (or Egyptian); Greek words are quoted in transliteration except in a few cases where the significance of a passage depends on the use of the Greek alphabet, and in titles of works cited in the Bibliography (readers should be warned that many works listed in the Bibliography do assume a knowledge of Greek). A few Egyptian words are also quoted in the standard transliteration.

To achieve complete consistency in the spelling of proper names, which might be Egyptian, Greek, Roman, or a combination of these, is a doomed task. In general, we have rendered names as closely as possible to their Greek form (using 'k' not 'c' for κ, etc.), except for Roman names, which are Latinised (so 'Aurelius', not 'Aurelios'), and when it would seem pedantic not to use the Latinised or anglicised form by which the individual is commonly known (so 'Ptolemy' for the kings, but 'Ptolemaios' for other individuals of that name).

## A note on the presentation of the translated sources

Brackets occurring within the passages from the sources are of three kinds. Round brackets (thus) enclose matter additional to the original text, supplied for explanation (*when italicised, thus*), expansion or connection. Brackets <thus> indicate text which the editors think has been accidentally omitted by the scribe. Square brackets [thus] indicate text 'restored' by modern scholars where the document itself is fragmentary or illegible; it should be noted, however, that restorations are indicated only where the translator regards them as substantial or doubtful. 'NN' (=No Name) represents a name which is lost or illegible.

## Egyptian dating systems

Various different calendars and methods of dating were employed in Egypt during the period covered by this book. The Egyptian year consisted of twelve months of thirty days, followed by five intercalary ('epagomenal') days. From the reign of Augustus, a sixth intercalary day was added every fourth year to preserve the correct

relationship with the astronomical solar year, fixing the first day of the Egyptian year (1 Thoth) at 29 August. The Macedonian calendar, also used in the early Ptolemaic period, was progressively assimilated to the Egyptian year, so that after the third century B.C., the Macedonian months became equivalent to Egyptian months. In the Roman period, some months acquired honorific names connected with the Imperial house; the most common are given in the table below:

Date by Julian calendar	Egyptian date	Macedonian month name	Roman honorific month name
August 29	Thoth 1	Dios	Sebastos
September 28	Phaophi 1	Apellaios	
October 28	Hathyr 1	Audnaios	Neos Sebastos
November 27	Choiak 1	Peritios	
December 22	Tybi 1	Dystros	
January 26	Mecheir 1	Xandikos	
February 25	Phamenoth 1	Artemisios	
March 27	Pharmouthi 1	Daisios	
April 26	Pachon 1	Panemos	
May 26	Pauni 1	Loios	
June 25	Epeiph 1	Gorpiaios	
July 25	Mesore 1	Hyperberetaios	Kaisareios
August 24–28	Intercalary days		

The year is expressed most commonly as the regnal year of the current ruler (whether Ptolemaic monarch or Roman emperor); a new ruler's first year lasted only from accession to the end of the current Egyptian year, the next 1 Thoth beginning his second year. Latin documents employ the Roman system of dating, by 'consular' years (i.e. by the names of the current consuls at Rome); see **4.139** for an example of both consular and regnal year dating. Latin documents express days by counting backwards from the Kalends, Nones or Ides of the month (1st, 5th and 13th; except that in March, May, July, and October, the Nones are the 7th, and the Ides the 15th); also see **4.139**.

From the reign of Diocletian (AD 284–305), consular dating became normal for all official documents (or post-consular dating, by the names of the previous year's consuls, if the current names were not yet known), and other ways of dating years also appear. Indiction dates identify a year of the current indiction cycle (a series of fifteen-year tax cycles starting from AD 312); without further information, they do not supply an absolute date (e.g. **5.178**). For the so-called 'era of Oxyrhynchos' also used in dating, see **2.61**.

## Money, weights and measures

In Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt, the standard coin was the tetradrachm (4-drachma piece, or *stater*). In the Ptolemaic period, this was a silver coin weighing c. 14 g, and

remained relatively pure. From the late third century B.C., however, monetary values are normally expressed in the papyri in the token bronze money, which underwent successive depreciations in relation to the silver. In Egyptian texts, the *deben* and the *kite* were employed: 1 *deben* = 10 *kite* = 20 drachmas.

By the early Roman period, the 'silver' tetradrachm had become a billon coin, consisting of an alloy of silver and base metal which became increasingly debased; by the mid-third century A.D., it was almost completely bronze. The tetradrachm was treated as equivalent to the Roman *denarius* (which did not circulate in Egypt), although it contained less silver.

1 talent = 60 minas = 1,500 staters (tetradrachms) = 6,000 drachmas

1 drachma = 6 or 7 obols

After Diocletian's reforms of the imperial currency (between c. 295/6 and 300), the coinage of Egypt was assimilated to that elsewhere in the Roman empire. The gold solidus (4 g) was divided into 24 carats. Payments also continued to be made in the debased billon currency, expressed as multiples of the denarius (i.e. the tetradrachm): talents and myriads (1 myriad = 10,000 denarii); see **2.61**.

The drachma and its multiples and subdivisions were units of weight as well as of money.

Most dry and liquid measures varied in capacity according to the size of the container used to measure them. The main dry measure was the artaba. The government artaba of the Roman period was c. 40 litres, containing 40 choinikes, but artabas of other sizes were also used.

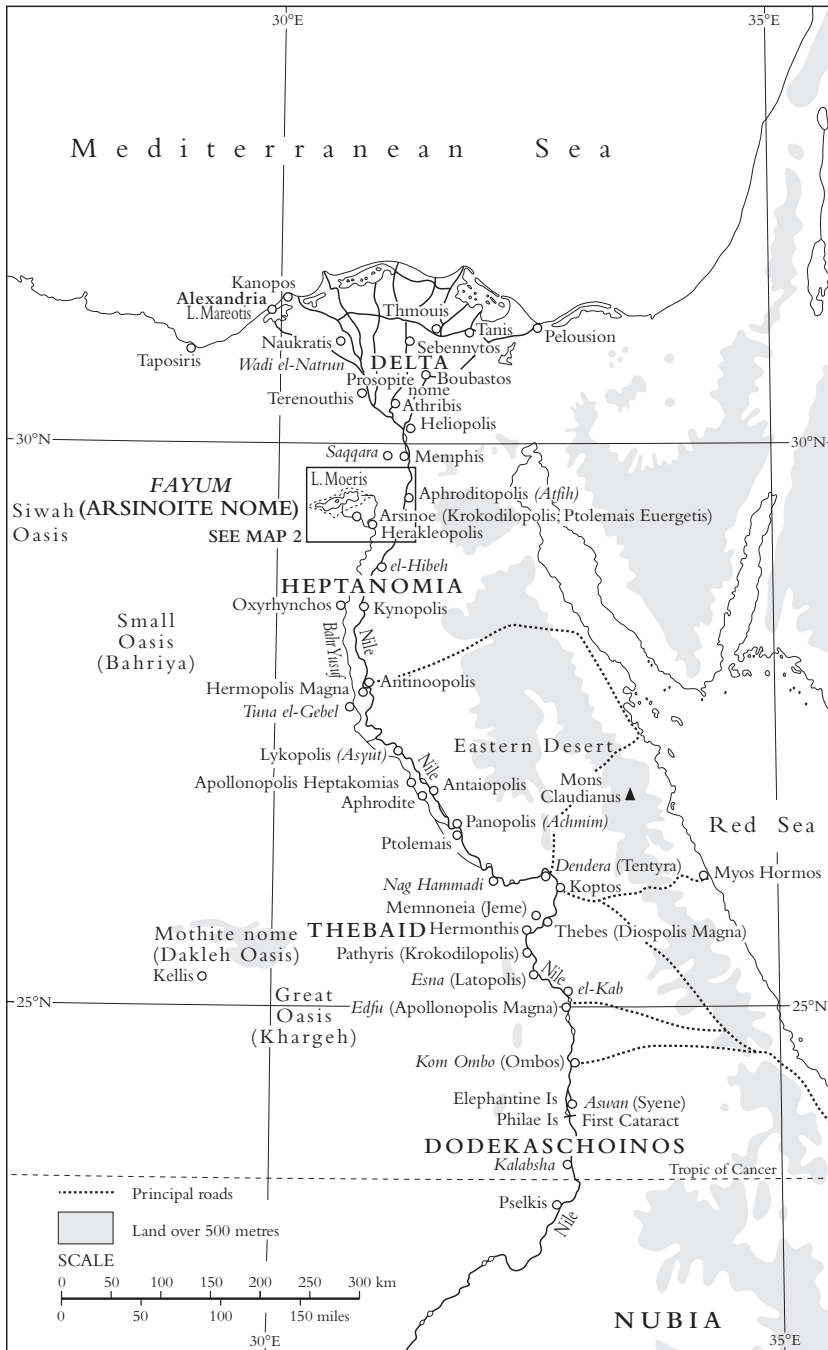


# Glossary

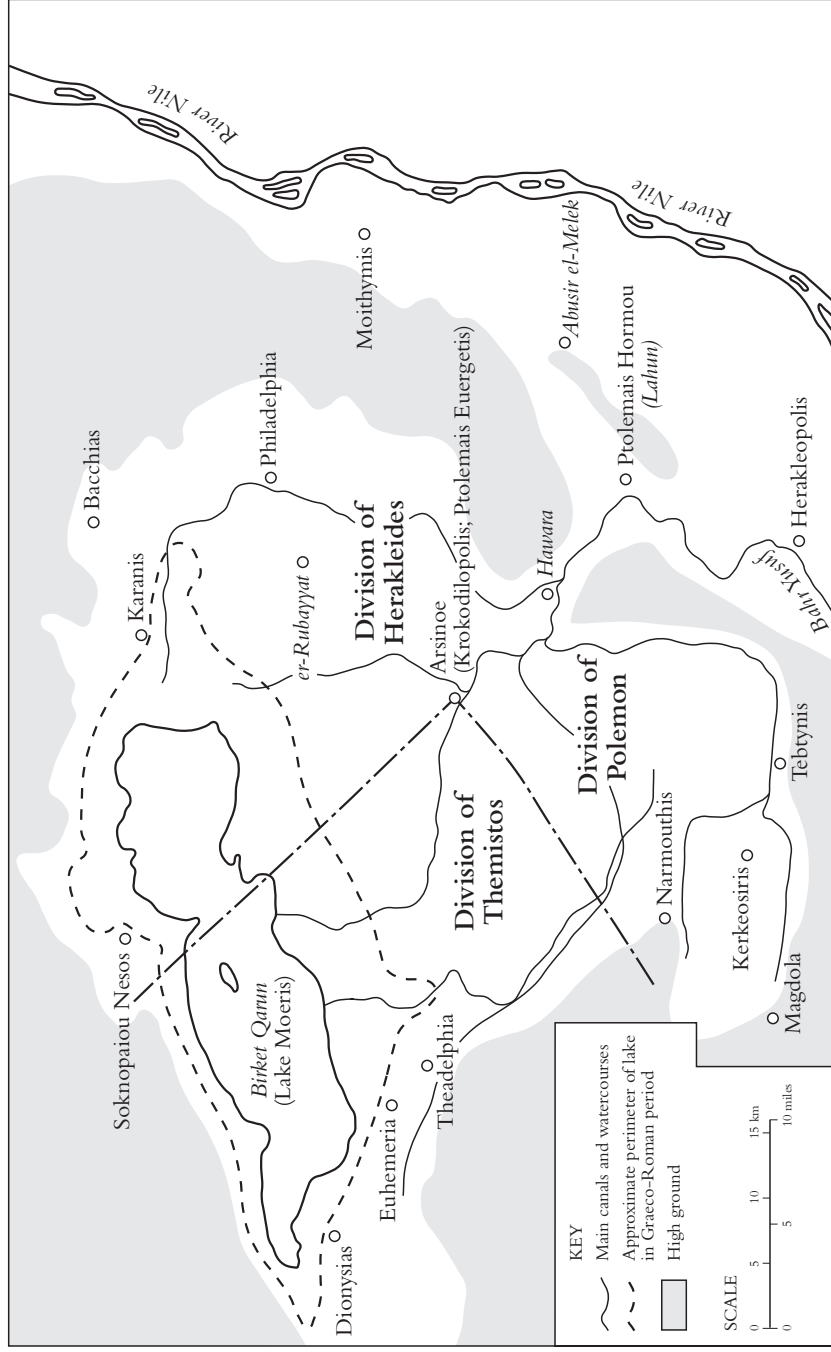
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<i>agoranomos</i>	A municipal official responsible for the marketplace, who also in Ptolemaic and early Roman Egypt functioned as a notary in a wide variety of transactions.
annona	A requisition or tax in kind.
apomoirā	A tax on vineyards and orchards.
<i>archidikastes</i>	A judicial official.
aroura	The standard unit of area; equivalent to 0.68 acre or 0.275 hectare.
<i>athlophoros</i>	The title of the priestess of Queen Berenike II; ‘prize-bearer’, referring to her Olympic victory.
chiton	Greek tunic, worn by both men and women.
choinix	Sub-division ( $\frac{1}{40}$ or $\frac{1}{48}$ ) of the artaba; approx. 1 litre in capacity.
chora	The hinterland of Egypt (including the <i>metropoleis</i> ), as opposed to the city of Alexandria.
deben	An Egyptian monetary unit, equivalent to 20 drachmas.
deme	A sub-division of the citizen body in a Greek polis.
dorea	Revocable gift-estate granted by the Ptolemies to their high officials.
<i>epistates</i>	A local superintendent in the Ptolemaic period.
epistrategos	In the Ptolemaic period, regional governor of the Thebaid. In the Roman period, four epistrategoi provided a tier of administration between the nome officials and those of the province.
epoikion	Farmstead, or ‘tied’ estate village.
<i>exegetes</i>	A municipal official.
gymnasiarch	The chief official of a gymnasium.
himation	Greek cloak or mantle, worn over the tunic by either sex.
indiction	Year in the series of tax cycles of fifteen years beginning in AD 312.
<i>iuridicus</i>	A Roman official of equestrian status, concerned with legal matters.
<i>kanephoros</i>	The title of the priestess of Queen Arsinoe II; ‘basket-bearer’.
katoikic land	The category of land assigned in the Ptolemaic period to high-status kleruchs (cavalrymen). In the Roman period, it became a category of private property, taxed at one artaba per aroura.
kite	An Egyptian monetary unit; 1 kite was equivalent to 2 drachmas.
kleros	A parcel of land assigned to military settlers during the Ptolemaic period. In the Roman period, the term was often simply a topographical description (‘in the kleros of so-and-so’).
kleruch	A military settler in the Ptolemaic period, assigned a kleros of land.
kleruchic land	The category of land assigned to kleruchs in the Ptolemaic period.

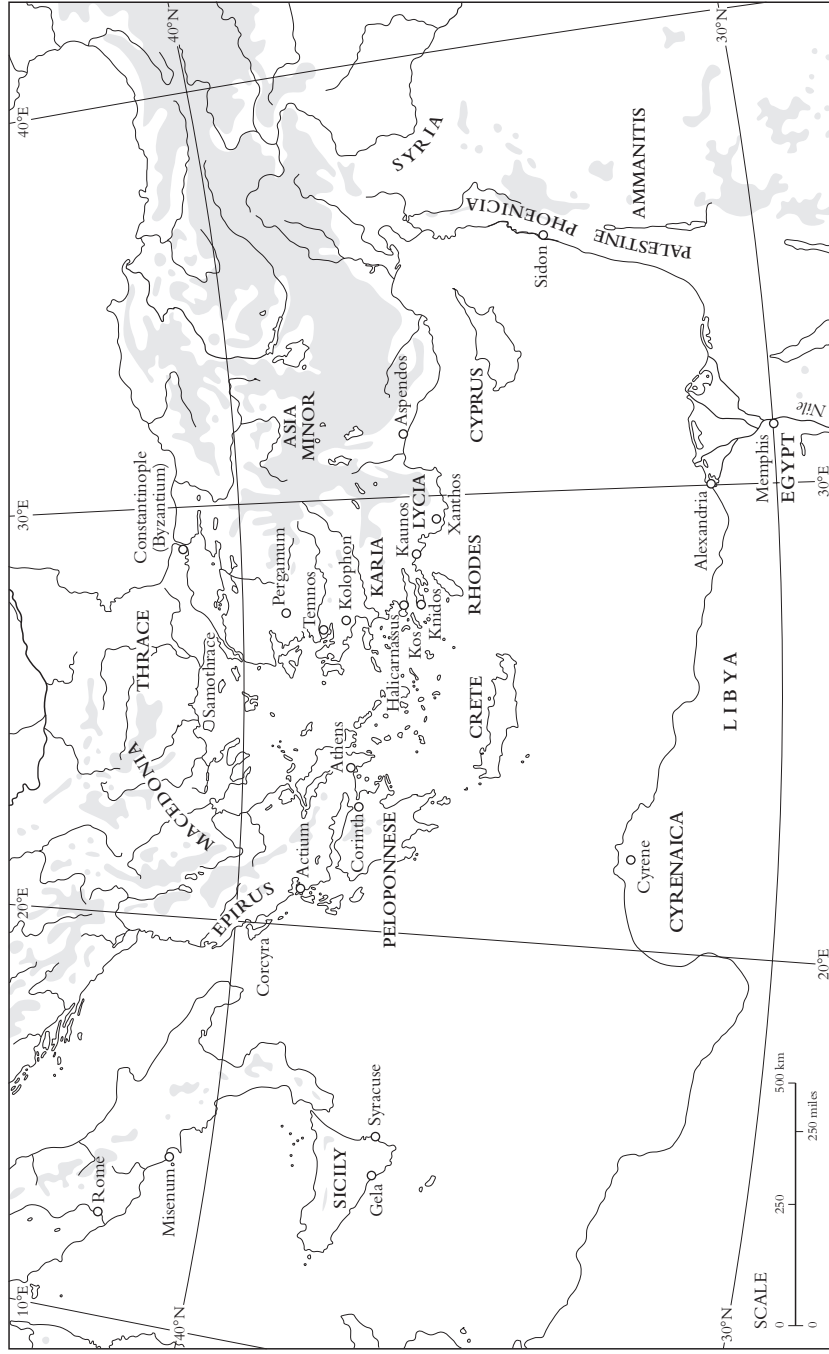
komarch	A village official.
<i>kosmetes</i>	A municipal official.
<i>kyrios</i>	The male guardian required for women in Greek legal contexts.
<i>logistes</i>	The main nome official from the fourth century.
<i>metropolis</i>	The chief town of a nome, granted full civic status by Septimius Severus in AD 200.
mina	A unit of currency (= 100 drachmas), and of weight.
nome	One of the approximately forty districts into which Egypt was divided for the purposes of regional government.
obol	A subdivision ( $\frac{1}{2}$ or $\frac{1}{4}$ ) of the drachma.
pagarch	A local government official.
<i>pastophoros</i>	A low grade of Egyptian priest.
Persian (of the <i>epigone</i> )	The exact origin and significance of the term is disputed. In the early Ptolemaic period, 'Persian' seems to designate persons with some sort of privileged status without a claim to a more specific ethnic designation; for the meaning of ' <i>epigone</i> ', see <b>5.183</b> note 4. In the late Ptolemaic and Roman periods, the term refers to the legal status of an indebted party who had relinquished certain personal rights in order to secure the collection of the debt.
polis	A Greek city, normally possessing the institutions of political self-government: citizen assembly, council and magistrates.
procurator	A Roman financial administrator.
<i>prytanis</i>	The 'president' of a city council.
quarter	A weight, $\frac{1}{16}$ of a mina, $\frac{1}{4}$ of a 'gold piece' ( <i>chrysos</i> ).
sestertius	Roman coin: 4 sestertii were worth 1 denarius.
sistrum	A rattle used by worshippers in the cult of Isis.
solidus	A gold coin in the period after Diocletian's currency reforms between c. 295/6 and 300.
stater	A weight of approximately 14 g. Also a denomination of money (4 drachmas).
strategos	The chief administrative official of a nome.
subscription	The 'signature' normally appended at the bottom of a document.



**Map 1 Egypt in the Graeco-Roman period**



**Map 2 The Arsinoite nome (Fayum)**



**Map 3 The Eastern Mediterranean**



# 1 Introduction

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## 1. The purpose of this book

Ancient Egyptian civilisation is striking for the wealth of the material remains it has left for posterity: the pyramids, temples and other monuments, statues and painting, written texts, even the bodies of both humans and animals preserved through mummification. Thus many people are familiar with the names, not only of many of its male rulers, but also of royal women, such as Hatshepsut, Nefertiti, and Kleopatra, the last queen of the Ptolemaic dynasty. It is this late period of ancient Egyptian history (332 B C–A D 641), when Egypt was subject first to the Macedonian dynasty of the Ptolemies, and subsequently incorporated into the Roman and later the Byzantine empire, with which this book is primarily concerned. This period has left a copious range of documentation about the lives of ordinary people in the country towns and villages, consisting of both written texts and archaeological and other material evidence (discussed further below in section 3). This evidence depicts a culturally heterogeneous society formed by the interaction of the traditional Egyptian civilisation, which had been subject both to Near Eastern and African influence and to classical Greek and Roman culture.

The material collected in this sourcebook, documenting the lives of women in Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt,<sup>1</sup> reflects the complexity of this cultural interaction, and thus provides a body of evidence of great interest for students of ancient history (whether Greek, Roman or Near Eastern); social, cultural and gender history; and for anyone interested generally in the history of women or of ancient society. This introductory chapter, and the introductions and notes in subsequent chapters, are intended to make the

<sup>1</sup> Although not all the texts derive from Egypt (the texts of most Greek authors cited were preserved through the manuscript tradition, not through papyri from Egypt, and 6.238 is taken from a school book probably from the western Roman empire), they do all in some way bear on the lives of women in Egypt. Papyri or similar texts relating to women in other parts of the ancient world are not included; for examples which offer good parallels to the material collected here, see *P.Babatha* (legal texts relating to a Jewish woman from Maoza at the south of the Dead Sea in Israel), the similar archive of Salome (Cotton, 1995), and *Tab.Vindol.* II 291–2 (a birthday invitation and letter from Claudia Severa to Sulpicia Lepidina from Vindolanda in Northumberland, England).

book accessible to readers who have no previous knowledge of Ptolemaic or Roman Egypt.

All the sources collected in this book relate in some way to women. But is it right to concentrate on women as opposed to the other half of humanity? That women have traditionally been largely excluded from political and military history (distinctively 'male' spheres of action) is no justification for an exclusive concentration on women's behaviour in those spheres of society and economy in which both sexes participated and interacted. It has been argued, with much plausibility, that we can appreciate what it means to be female only in conjunction with an understanding of what it means to be male; that 'male' and 'female', 'men' and 'women' are relational terms, which can be defined only in contradistinction to one another. For this reason, it is preferable to write the history of 'gender', in which women's and men's behaviour is explored in relation to one another.<sup>2</sup>

In fact, one of the strengths of the sources collected in this book is that throughout women are shown not in isolation, but interacting with others, male and female, in contexts ranging from the immediate family to society at large. This material enables us both to identify cases in which women's behaviour was not sharply differentiated from men's (for instance, in the procedures for borrowing grain, or in casting a magical spell), and to see what was genuinely distinctive in women's experience.

Thus the texts, although chosen to illustrate aspects of women's experience, incidentally also throw light both on men's activities and on broader aspects of Egyptian society in this period, from demography to literacy, governmental structures to religious practices. The editorial material draws attention where appropriate to such matters, as well as to whether a particular text is typical of the overall range of evidence from Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt, or whether it is unusual or even unique. Although one purpose of a sourcebook is to allow the sources to 'speak for themselves', to enable readers to draw whatever conclusions they find appropriate from the material included, it is also incumbent upon the editors to provide, for a readership which may have little or no background knowledge, sufficient context for each item to ensure that its significance is not fundamentally misinterpreted.

The editorial material in this book is arranged in the following way. The rest of this chapter provides general background information on Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt: a brief survey of its history and of the changing structures of its government and administration and the rhythms of everyday life; and finally some general information on the kinds of source material used in the book. The sources are then grouped into five thematic chapters, each with an introduction explaining its arrangement and general issues relevant to the source material within it. Within chapters, the sources are grouped by

<sup>2</sup> See for instance Scott (1986).



topic into sections. The precise arrangement of material, however, and particularly the extent to which arrangement is chronological, varies between the chapters to suit the nature of their subject matter. Naturally, many individual texts are relevant to several different themes, and may indeed be relevant to more than one chapter; cross-references<sup>3</sup> in the introductions to the chapters or the sources themselves draw attention to the relevance of passages elsewhere in the book, while the index provides another way of following up themes illustrated by material arranged in disparate places.

## 2. **Greek and Roman Egypt: historical background**

In the mid-fifth century B.C., the Greek historian Herodotus visited Egypt. At this time Egypt was part of the Persian empire, and had been since its conquest by Kambyses in 525 B.C. Thereafter, except for periods of rebellion when native pharaohs temporarily re-established control, it remained subject to rule by a succession of foreign powers. In his account of the conflict between Greece and Persia, Herodotus included a lengthy discussion of Egypt's history and social customs, one important theme of which is the 'otherness' of Egypt in comparison with the practices of the Greek world. The reversal of gender roles forms a prominent aspect of this comparison:

Not only is the climate different from that of the rest of the world, and the rivers unlike any other rivers, but the people also in most of their manners and customs exactly reverse the common practice of mankind. The women manage the marketplace and the shops, while the men weave indoors; and although other people push the woof upwards when they weave, Egyptians push it down. The men carry their burdens on top of their heads, but the women carry them on their shoulders. The women urinate standing up, but the men squat down. They do their eating outside in the streets, but defecate inside their houses; on the grounds that what is shameful yet necessary should be carried out secretly, while what is not shameful should be done in the open. A woman cannot serve in the priestly office of any deity, whether male or female, but men serve as priests to all, gods and goddesses. Sons need not take care of their parents unless they choose, but daughters must do so, even if they are unwilling.

While there is clearly more to this theme of reversal than mere literal description, some of the points of contrast reflect real differences of gender roles between traditional Egyptian and Greek society.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> References to texts in the same chapter simply give the number of the text (e.g. 236); those to texts in other chapters cite both chapter and text (e.g. 6.236). References to chapter 3 may be to an archive (see below) rather than a single text (e.g. Ch.3 Arch. H).

<sup>4</sup> Herodotus, *Histories*, II.35; on the accuracy or otherwise of Herodotus' description, see Lloyd (1976), 146–52. For women in Pharaonic Egyptian society, see Lesko (1989) parts I and II, Robins (1993), Tyldesley (1994), Capel and Markoe (1996).

The climate and ecology would indeed also appear strange to a visitor from the Mediterranean. Since prehistoric times, rainfall in Egypt has been negligible; instead the country was totally dependent for water on the river Nile and its annual flood, which inundated the entire valley for a month or two in summer, leaving towns and villages raised on mounds like islands. As the water receded, depositing a layer of fertile silt on the fields, farmers sowed their seed in the damp earth for crops to be harvested the following spring. Thus the Egyptians divided the year into three, not four, seasons: *akhet*, the flood, *peret*, the sowing, and *shemu*, the harvest. The religious calendar of ritual and festivals also followed the rhythm of the Nile, reflecting anxieties that the flood might be insufficient or excessive.

The Nile, too, dictates the regional structure of Egypt, which has a long, narrow strip of cultivable land over 600 miles along the valley, fanning out in the north where the Nile splits into a broad delta. Despite the ease of transport and communication provided by the river, Egypt was perceived as the union of two distinct areas: Upper (southern) Egypt, focussed on the great religious centre of Thebes (modern Luxor), and Lower (northern) Egypt with its most important city, Memphis, just south of the apex of the Delta. To east and west, the boundary between valley and desert is remarkably sharp; immediately the ground rises, it turns from fertile green to barren rock or sand. Some towns and villages, as well as many tombs and necropoleis for the dead, lay just beyond the cultivated area on the desert edge. A little further out the monks of late antiquity sited their hermits' cells. Routes radiated from the valley across the desert: to the Red Sea (important for trade with the east), and the stone quarries in the mountains of the eastern desert, exploited by rulers from native pharaohs to Roman emperors; and to the oases of the western desert.

At the time of Herodotus' visit, there were already Greeks living in Egypt: since the seventh century BC, they had been attracted to the country as traders and mercenaries. Indeed, a Greek city called Naukratis had been founded in the Delta as a port of trade; from here, according to Herodotus (II.134–5), came a famous *hetaira* (courtesan) Rhodopis who was bought by the poet Sappho's brother. The city of Memphis, a major economic as well as religious centre, included many Greeks in its cosmopolitan population.

Persian rule seems to have been bitterly resented by the Egyptians, and Alexander the Great was welcomed as a liberator when he took control of Egypt in the winter of 332/1 BC during his conquest of the Persian empire. Alexander conciliated the Egyptians by sacrificing to the native gods, held games at Memphis, which would have pleased the Greeks living there, and found time to journey through the desert to the Siwah oasis, to consult the oracle of Ammon, from which (according to later accounts) he learnt that he was the son of Zeus. But for Egypt, the most substantial legacy of his visit was his foundation of Alexandria on the Mediterranean coast, destined to become for the next six centuries the largest city of the Greek world, a major political, cultural and economic centre. In spring 331, Alexander

departed, to further conquests and a sudden and premature death at Babylon in Mesopotamia in June 323 B.C.

Alexander's death precipitated a prolonged struggle among his generals for control of his empire. The initial allocation of governorships gave Egypt to Ptolemy son of Lagos, who immediately took physical control of the country, defending and consolidating his position throughout the bitter 'Wars of the Successors' against his rivals. At first, like the other generals, he ruled his territories in the name of kings Philip III, Alexander the Great's half-brother, and Alexander IV, Alexander's infant son, who succeeded him as Macedonian kings; but these two soon fell victim to the ambitions of the rival generals, and from November 305 Ptolemy himself took the royal title, as Pharaoh to the Egyptians and *basileus* ('king') to his Greek and Macedonian subjects.<sup>5</sup>

From the start, Ptolemy I was eager to attract immigrants to Egypt from the Greek world, both to Alexandria and to the Egyptian countryside, known in Greek as the *chora*. Alexandria was rapidly developed both as an economic centre, its three excellent harbours providing a link between the Nile valley and the Mediterranean sea, and as a cultural centre rivalling the prestige of Athens. Ptolemy was assisted by Demetrius of Phaleron, a pupil of Aristotle, in founding the famous Museum and Library within the area of the royal palace, which dominated the eastern quarter of the city.<sup>6</sup> In order to maintain the loyalty of his troops in a period of volatile allegiances, as well as to develop a hellenised population in the *chora*, Ptolemy provided his soldiers with *kleroi*, allotments of land, in many parts of Egypt. This policy, continued by his successors, had a profound impact on Egyptian rural society, as the military settlers (*kleruchs*) and their families came into contact with the local Egyptian population, and often intermarried with them. Unfortunately we do not know exactly how many settlers came in total, even less how many women accompanied the *kleruchs*, but a rough estimate would suggest perhaps 100,000 *kleruchs* and active soldiers, in addition to many thousands of male civilians, settling in the *chora*, accompanied by probably rather fewer women.<sup>7</sup> *Kleruchs* were settled throughout the Delta and Nile valley, although because of the survival of the papyri (see

<sup>5</sup> The title 'Soter' (Saviour), by which Ptolemy I was known to later generations, was not used as an official title in Egypt during his lifetime. Hazzard (1992) argues against the common view that it was first granted to Ptolemy in 304 B.C. by the people of Rhodes in gratitude for his help during a siege.

<sup>6</sup> The best description of the topography and organisation of Ptolemaic Alexandria is by Strabo (XVII.1.6–10), who himself visited Egypt shortly after the Roman takeover, during the 20s B.C.

<sup>7</sup> On settlement numbers in the *chora*, see Rathbone (1990), 113; also *P.Count.* (forthcoming). In addition, there must have been over 100,000 male immigrants to Alexandria, with perhaps a not greatly inferior number of women; we should expect some attempt to maintain the hellenic identity of its citizen population, although now evidence has come to light of a second generation Alexandrian citizen, Monimos son of Kleandros, who married an Egyptian woman, Esoeris (Clarysse, 1992).

below, pp. 19–20), our knowledge of it is concentrated on two areas: the northern part of the Nile valley from Memphis south to around Hermopolis, and the Fayum, a fertile area adjacent to the Nile valley to the south-west of Memphis. Ptolemy I also founded a Greek city (*polis*), Ptolemais, in Upper Egypt, perhaps as a counterweight to the enormous regional influence of the priests of Amun in the old Pharaonic capital of Thebes.

Ptolemy's son, Ptolemy II (Philadelphos), who had been associated as joint ruler for the last three years of his father's reign, did much to consolidate and enhance the profile of the dynasty, as well as to develop the political and economic strength of his kingdom, which encompassed numerous overseas territories in addition to Egypt. In these policies, he is sometimes regarded as having been influenced by his second wife, his sister Arsinoe (see 2.2), and certainly the public image of Arsinoe, and of their parents, Ptolemy I and Berenike, was very important in legitimating Ptolemaic rule, both in Egypt and overseas, through the institution of festivals and of cults, both of the dynasty as a whole and of its individual female members.<sup>8</sup> The practices of brother–sister marriage and of using cult to enhance the dynasty's image continued under subsequent generations of the family.

The reigns of Ptolemy II (285–246) and Ptolemy III (Euergetes: 246–221) have often been regarded as the apogee of Ptolemaic prosperity and power:

In Egypt, there is everything that exists anywhere in the world: wealth, gymnasia, power, peace, fame, sights, philosophers, gold, young men, the shrine of the Sibling Gods, a good king, the Museum, wine – all the good things one could want. And women – more of them, I swear by the daughters of Hades than heaven boasts stars – and their looks; like the goddesses who once induced Paris to judge their beauty!<sup>9</sup>

The praise of poets working under Ptolemaic patronage should not, of course, be taken literally, and recent assessments have in particular suggested that economic problems arose towards the end of Ptolemy II's reign, as the result of imperialistic over-extension.<sup>10</sup> But the papyri written in Greek, which survive in large numbers from about 260 BC onwards, suggest a spate of activity by officials and other immigrants devoted to consolidating the economic and administrative organisation of Egypt, in the common interest of the royal revenues and the individuals themselves.

Over its long history, Pharaonic Egypt had developed a relatively complex and sophisticated administrative structure. The collection and distribution of revenues by officials were recorded meticulously by the scribes, who occupied a highly regarded position in Egyptian society. These procedures

<sup>8</sup> See further 2.3–6. It is notable that several queens seem to have achieved some genuine popularity as goddesses, whereas cults were not established to individual male members of the dynasty. The cult of Ptolemy I and Berenike (the 'Theoi Soteres') was originally distinct from the main dynastic cult, but was joined to it under Ptolemy IV.

<sup>9</sup> Herodas, *Mimes* 1, lines 26–35; cf. Theokritos, *Idyll* 17 for an encomium of Ptolemaic power. On Herodas, see 6.289; on Theokritos, 6.262. <sup>10</sup> Turner (1984).

were facilitated by the division of the country into some forty administrative districts, called *nomes*. Like the Persians before them, the Ptolemies did not entirely replace this traditional bureaucratic structure, preferring to modify it to suit their needs. The nome remained the basic administrative area, while the traditional scribal and revenue-collecting functions were preserved in officials operating at the level of the nome or of its subdivisions, the toparchy and village; such as the *basilikogrammateus* (royal scribe), *komo-grammateus* (village scribe) and *komarch*.<sup>11</sup> The names of these officials may suggest to the modern bureaucratic mind a clear demarcation both of function and of physical scope of competence, but the documents show that in practice the competence of officials was much more fluid than this implies, with several officials often co-operating in a particular task. At nome-level, new officials were also introduced: the *oikonomos* (steward), whose Greek title reminds us that from one perspective the Ptolemies could regard Egypt as their personal *oikos* (family estate); and the *strategos* (commander), whose role initially concerned only the military settlers, but gradually expanded to become the main nome official. The assessment and collection of royal revenues were a concern of all these officials to some degree, and also of the checking-clerks (*antigraphais*); one basic principle of this multiplicity of officials was that they should keep a check on one another's honesty and competence. Like other Hellenistic monarchs, the Ptolemies were absolute rulers, unchecked by any council or other elected body, and assisted by only their own appointees: the 'friends' (*philoî*), who were advisers, and various high officials based in Alexandria, such as the *dioiketes*, responsible for financial administration.

Under the early Ptolemies, the concern to maximise royal revenue and to create a kingdom which was at least partially hellenised led to significant economic developments. Major irrigation works in the Fayum (renamed the Arsinoite nome about 257 BC, after Ptolemy II's sister-wife Arsinoe) greatly expanded the cultivable area, providing land for development by settlers from the Greek world, assisted by a workforce attracted from other parts of Egypt (and abroad: Syrians and other Semites). The scale of this new development may have helped to minimise, although it certainly did not wholly prevent, resentment by the Egyptian population of their new neighbours and overlords. Two crop changes of major importance reflected Greek dietary preferences – for *puros* (durum wheat) as opposed to *olyra*, the traditional Egyptian grain (probably *triticum dicoccum*, emmer wheat), and for wine alongside the traditional barley beer. The tax revenue of  $\frac{1}{3}$  (the *apomoira*) on the vast new areas of vineyard was devoted exclusively to funding the cult of Arsinoe.<sup>12</sup> On oil, however, the Greeks may have had to compromise their cultural preferences; although the cultivation of olives was

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Falivene (1991).

<sup>12</sup> Only the *apomoira* from non-temple land was devoted to the cult of Arsinoe; that from temple land continued to be paid to the Egyptian temples for the gods in general, as in pre-Ptolemaic times; Clarysse and Vandorpe (1998).

apparently expanded, particularly in the Fayum (cf. **5.169**), Egypt is not ideally suited to olive-growing, and it is clear from the surviving regulations concerning the monopoly of oil production that most oil in Egypt came not from olive trees, but from various field-crops.<sup>13</sup>

Perhaps the most important economic change was the monetisation of sectors of the economy; hitherto Egypt had issued no coinage for internal use, operating a 'natural' economy.<sup>14</sup> Under the Ptolemies (and the Romans later) taxes on most grain production continued to be collected in kind, but money taxes were introduced on some agricultural produce (notably that from pasture), trades and manufactured goods, and for a bewildering variety of small personal taxes. Thus no one in Egypt, Greek or Egyptian, male or female, could have remained unaffected by these changes. The Ptolemies initially issued gold, silver and bronze coins, but ordinary monetary transactions attested in our documents refer only to silver and bronze: drachmas and their sub-divisions, obols and chalkoi. From the late third century onward, transactions were conducted only with reference to the bronze currency.<sup>15</sup> The currency was a 'closed' system: Ptolemaic coins did not circulate outside Egypt and the Ptolemaic overseas possessions, while foreign currency was forbidden to circulate within Ptolemaic territory, and had to be exchanged (at a cost) for Ptolemaic coin.

By the late third century, new immigration seems to have tailed off; families who had been settled in the Egyptian chora for two generations or more would mostly have lost their links with their ancestral Greek cities, and some would have intermarried with local Egyptian families. From now until the end of the Ptolemaic period, it becomes increasingly difficult for the historian to establish an individual's ethnicity; certainly nomenclature is a poor guide, since one individual could have both an Egyptian and a Greek name, used in different contexts.<sup>16</sup> Even persons described explicitly as 'Greek' might be of predominantly Egyptian ancestry. Ethnic identity had clearly become partly a matter of self-definition within the officially defined categories, reflecting one's social aspirations as well as cultural preferences. The ambiguities and tensions arising from such choices, which the historian can barely grasp, must have been much more immediate for the individuals themselves.

In 207 BC a major rebellion broke out in the Thebaid. For some twenty years two rebel pharaohs, Haronnophris and Chaonnophris, controlled parts of Upper Egypt. Egyptian documents from this area are dated by their reigns

<sup>13</sup> E.g. sesame oil for food, castor oil for lights (called kiki or kroton; see **3.79, 86**). See the 'Revenue Laws of Ptolemy Philadelphos' (*PRev*), partly translated in Austin (1981), nos. 236 (*apomoira*), and 235 (oil-crops); and Sandy (1989).

<sup>14</sup> However, the deben and kite were used as accounting units; see Glossary.

<sup>15</sup> While the gold and silver coins remained relatively pure, the bronze was a token currency, whose value dropped considerably against the silver and gold in the course of the third and second centuries. <sup>16</sup> Clarysse (1985).

(see 5.163), and work temporarily ceased on the great temple of Horos at Edfu, begun in 238 by Ptolemy III as an act of royal patronage.<sup>17</sup> Worse, Ptolemy V Epiphanes was a young child when he succeeded to the throne on the premature death of his father (Ptolemy IV Philopator, 221–204 BC), and two aggressive rival kings, Philip V of Macedon and the Seleucid Antiochos III, seized the chance to dismember much of the Ptolemaic overseas empire. By an astute policy of alliance with the priesthood of Memphis, royal authority was gradually reasserted over the whole of Egypt.<sup>18</sup> But a marriage link with Kleopatra I, daughter of Antiochos, failed to regain the crucial territory of Syria–Phoenicia, despite claims that it had constituted her dowry.

The dynastic problems worsened: Epiphanes also died young (in 180 BC), and his two sons on reaching adulthood spent much of their energies disputing the monarchy with one another, both seeking the support of Rome which from the early second century was an increasingly dominant factor in the politics of the Hellenistic East. But Rome showed little interest in Ptolemaic affairs apart from one celebrated occasion in 168 when the pro-consul Popillius Laenas obliged the Seleucid king Antiochos IV to withdraw from an attempted takeover of Egypt.<sup>19</sup> After the death of the elder brother (Ptolemy VI Philometor, 180–145), and of his son (Ptolemy VII, rapidly disposed of in 145), Ptolemy VIII, along with his second wife, his niece Kleopatra III, became embroiled in a civil war against his first wife, Kleopatra II (mother of Kleopatra III). The deleterious effect of this war on the whole country is reflected in the amnesty decree issued jointly by the three rulers after their reconciliation in 118 BC.<sup>20</sup> Kleopatra III remained a powerful figure after Ptolemy VIII's death (in 116 BC), ruling jointly with first her elder son, then her younger son, who eventually murdered her in 101 BC.<sup>21</sup>

In the first century, Egypt's fate became closely bound up with that of Rome. The Roman general Sulla's choice of Ptolemy XI as ruler in 80 BC failed to secure the approval of the increasingly vociferous Alexandrian populace. But the longer reign of his successor Ptolemy XII 'Auletes' (80–51 BC) was dogged by the need to resort to bribery to secure Roman support, firstly for recognition by Rome in the face of the plans of some politicians

<sup>17</sup> Pestman (1995b).

<sup>18</sup> D. J. Thompson (1988), ch. 4, esp. 118–21. The famous Rosetta stone contains a priestly decree of 196 thanking Epiphanes for restoring order in the country; several other similar decrees followed in the 180s.

<sup>19</sup> Polybius, xxix.27; cf. Livy, xlv.12. The recent discovery at Saqqara of a group of ostraka written by an Egyptian priest called Hor, who claimed to have foreseen Antiochos' withdrawal in a dream, has confirmed our knowledge of these events, and added details: Ray (1976), texts 1–7; cf. pp. 124–30.

<sup>20</sup> *P.Tebt.* 15, translated in *Sel.Pap.* II 210 and Austin (1981), no. 231.

<sup>21</sup> Ptolemies IX and X; see 2.8, for Pausanias' account of these events.

(notably Crassus and Caesar) for a takeover of Egypt, and secondly for restoration to his throne from which the Alexandrians had expelled him (58–55 BC). A Roman, Rabirius Postumus, was brought in as Auletes' financial minister (*dioiketes*) to help him in his financial straits, and the troops of Gabinius, the Roman governor of Syria, who had assisted in the restoration remained to support him. Egypt had become a Roman protectorate.

However, the final and most famous Ptolemaic ruler managed to seize the opportunity provided by civil war in Rome to restore a brief semblance of Ptolemaic greatness. Although the 'myth' of Kleopatra VII may be now easier to grasp than the historical realities, it does seem that an initial phase of insecurity culminated in her accompanying Caesar to Rome. On her return to Egypt after his murder in 44 BC, Kleopatra began consciously to devise policies and to project an image of herself designed to enhance her popularity in Egypt. In particular, she was able to influence Marcus Antonius (Mark Antony), who as triumvir and governor of the eastern half of the Roman empire had the power to delegate authority to 'client rulers', and hence to grant her control of significant parts of the former Ptolemaic overseas empire.<sup>22</sup> In 34 BC a massive public relations exercise, the so-called 'donations of Alexandria', was staged to divide the eastern territories (including some which Rome did not in fact control) among Kleopatra herself, her son (allegedly by Caesar) Ptolemy XV Caesarion, and her sons and daughter by Antony, Alexander Helios (Sun), Kleopatra Selene (Moon), and Ptolemy Philadelphos. But such displays merely made it easier for Antony's rival Octavian (Caesar's adopted son, the future emperor Augustus) to consolidate Roman public opinion behind him in a concerted campaign of vilification against Antony's liaison with the 'Eastern queen'. Octavian's victory in the war which followed owed almost as much to the effectiveness of this propaganda as to the military victories of his generals; at Actium in September 31 BC, Kleopatra and Antony managed to escape the enemy blockade with part of their fleet, to hold out in Egypt until their final defeat and death nearly a year later (August 30 BC) (see **2.14**). Caesarion (whose paternity made him a severe threat to Octavian) was rapidly eliminated, and Kleopatra Selene married off to a 'client king', Juba of Mauretania (the other two sons disappear from the historical record). Egypt, much too dangerous to remain a client kingdom, was made into a Roman province.

Roman Egypt was undoubtedly a 'province of the Roman people', and not (as some older views claim) a personal possession of the Roman emperor; nevertheless there were some anomalies in its administration.<sup>23</sup> Presumably because of its perceived threat to Roman stability (we must remember that Alexandria remained a great and cosmopolitan city,

<sup>22</sup> See further **2.13**, and the works cited in its introduction. For a general narrative of this period, see Pelling (1996).

<sup>23</sup> See Bowman, Champlin and Lintott (1996), 676–702 for a general survey of early Roman Egypt.



second only to Rome), its governors and other leading officials<sup>24</sup> were taken not from the senatorial class as were the governors of all other major provinces, but from the second, equestrian, rank. Moreover, neither senators nor prominent equestrians were allowed to visit the country without explicit imperial permission; when the emperor Tiberius' popular nephew Germanicus did so in AD 19, it was a politically sensitive moment.<sup>25</sup> Augustus (as Octavian was known from 27 BC onwards) and his successors did, however, allow favoured relatives and friends to hold estates in Egypt (see 2.17). The Romans also retained a monetary system for Egypt separate from that in the rest of the empire, although the two were brought quite closely into line.<sup>26</sup>

In contrast to the early Ptolemies, the Romans did not encourage immigration into Egypt. In the Augustan period we find a number of distinctively Roman names in Egypt,<sup>27</sup> of persons who had either accompanied the military dynasts of the mid-first century (often their freedmen), or were locals granted citizenship for some service. Later nearly all the Roman citizens, apart from officials, mentioned in our documents were natives of the province who had acquired citizen status, often through military service. Normally only Egyptians who already possessed citizenship of Alexandria (and could therefore be regarded as suitably 'hellenised') were granted Roman citizenship (Pliny, *Ep.* x.6); nevertheless Roman citizenship gradually extended among at least the upper echelons of society (women as well as men) until in AD 212 the emperor Caracalla granted Roman citizenship to the entire population of the empire (see **Ch. 4 Sect. III**).

From the Augustan period, a hierarchy of status encompassed the entire population of Egypt.<sup>28</sup> Apart from the Roman citizens, the citizens of Alexandria and the other Greek poleis (Naukratis, Ptolemais, and from its foundation in AD 130, Antinoopolis; each with its own laws), the whole population was classed as *Aiguptioi*, Egyptians, presumably reflecting how thoroughly, by the end of the Ptolemaic period, the descendants of the original Greek immigrants into the chora had merged with the local inhabitants.<sup>29</sup> However, within this class of 'Egyptians' a sharp distinction was drawn between the masses and the more hellenised élite, who lived in the *metropoleis*, the chief town of each nome. Admittance to metropolite status

<sup>24</sup> I.e. the Prefect (governor), *iuridicus* (legal official), *idios logos* (in charge of the imperial 'private account'), procurators (financial officials), *epistrategoi* (four regional governors), and commanders of the legions (three; later two).

<sup>25</sup> Tacitus, *Annals* II.59ff.; see Weingärtner (1969).

<sup>26</sup> The Alexandrian *tetradrachm* (4-drachma piece) was deemed equivalent to the Roman *denarius*.

<sup>27</sup> The '*tria nomina*', possessed only by Roman citizens; for an explanation of Roman nomenclature, see **Ch. 4 Sect. III** introduction.

<sup>28</sup> See further Bowman and Rathbone (1992).

<sup>29</sup> See further **Ch. 4**, especially on how law applied to the different groups.

gave a reduced rate of poll tax (payable by males between the ages of fourteen and sixty-two, but not by women);<sup>30</sup> but even more privileged was the strictly hereditary group (by both paternal and maternal descent) of ‘those from the gymnasium’, or in the Arsinoite nome, the ‘6475 Greek men in the Arsinoite’ (3.69). Even though women could not obtain these statuses directly (paralleling women’s lack of full civic status in a Greek *polis*), they were integrated into the hierarchy through their fathers and husbands, and by passing on their father’s status to their own sons.

Over the next centuries, the *metropoleis* gradually acquired the physical and institutional features characteristic of Greek cities throughout the eastern empire: civic buildings, baths, gymnasia, colonnaded streets, theatres, and temples in the ‘classical’ style juxtaposed with the older Egyptian temples.<sup>31</sup> The emperor Septimius Severus’ grant of town councils to the *metropoleis* in AD 200 completed their institutional transformation into full Greek *poleis*; but even before that, offices like the gymnasiarchy (head of the gymnasium) provided a focus for the aspirations of the metropolitan élite.<sup>32</sup>

The larger *metropoleis* were sizeable communities: Hermopolis had perhaps as many as 40,000 inhabitants, Oxyrhynchos maybe around 25,000. The villages, although generally lacking the amenities of a hellenised urban existence, varied tremendously in size, from simple farming hamlets of a few hundred inhabitants to communities like Karanis or Tebtynis, whose substantial remains are testimony, both to a large population (several thousand inhabitants each), and to some imposing buildings. Impressive stone temples were a repository of wealth and traditional Egyptian culture.<sup>33</sup> Although we know of no village gymnasia in the Roman period, some villages possessed baths, patronised by women as well as men.<sup>34</sup> Private houses, in both villages and *metropoleis*, were closely packed on narrow and often crooked streets, and were constructed of unbaked mud brick; but this material is well suited to the dry Egyptian climate, and can support buildings several storeys high, with cool underground vaults for storage (**Plates 20–2**).

One respect in which Egypt remained different from most other provinces of the empire was in the continuation from the Ptolemaic period of the nome-based system of regional administration. The titles of many officials were retained under Roman rule, although their functions were often modified: thus the strategos was the main (civil) official, assisted by the

<sup>30</sup> See Bagnall and Frier (1994), 27.

<sup>31</sup> See Bagnall (1993a), ch. 2, for a description of the town-centres’ appearance.

<sup>32</sup> See Lewis (1983), ch. 3. Women may occasionally have served as gymnasiarchs: e.g. *P.Amh.* II 64.6, *SB* XVI 12235; see Casarico (1982), and cf. van Bremen (1996), 68–73 on other eastern provinces.

<sup>33</sup> Village size: Rathbone (1990), 124–37. Remains at Karanis: Husselman (1979); Tebtynis: Gallazzi (1994), Gallazzi and Hadji-Minaglou (1989). Compare the wealth of the temple at Pela in the Oxyrhynchite nome: *P.Oxy.* XLIX 3473.

<sup>34</sup> 6.254; cf. 4.130 and **Plate 25**.

royal scribe. An important concern of these officials continued to be the assessment and collection of the land taxes in kind, in conjunction with the village officials and the men in charge of the village granaries, the *sitologoi*. As in the Ptolemaic period, the strategos had responsibility for settling disputes at nome level in response to the large numbers of petitions of complaint. He would attempt to resolve the problem by ordering the appropriate action, if necessary summoning the parties involved to a formal court hearing. More important cases might be considered by the *epistrategos*, or by the prefect himself at his annual assize.<sup>35</sup> The strategoi and royal scribes were drawn from the Alexandrian or metropolitan élites, and would normally be substantial landowners. They held office in nomes away from their homes and estates, to minimise potential conflicts of interest.<sup>36</sup>

Under Roman rule the bureaucratic tradition reached a peak of systematisation. Everybody and everything were counted and recorded: the human population through the house-to-house census (used as the basis for the poll tax) and declarations of birth and death, their property through declarations to the *bibliophylakes* (property-record keepers) and various kinds of land register, their animals through declarations of livestock. Even if the ultimate stimulus was the government's desire to get its taxes, there were some pay-offs for private individuals (as there are for the historian!), who gained a more secure title to their property through the plethora of documentation. Copies and records of legal contracts were assiduously kept (if not eaten by worms) in village record-offices, *grapheia*, or in the various record-offices of the *metropoleis* or in the central archives at Alexandria.<sup>37</sup>

All documents relating to the civil administration were written in Greek; Latin was used only within the army, and for wills and some other documents relating to Roman citizens.<sup>38</sup> The Egyptian Demotic script was still used for some private legal contracts at the beginning of the Roman period, but its use apparently shrank rapidly, continuing a trend towards the dominance of Greek which had begun even in the Ptolemaic period. The Egyptian temples themselves, with which were associated the schools for teaching Egyptian writing, seem to have suffered a progressive withdrawal of imperial (and local) patronage through the first and second centuries AD. This was probably not a deliberate policy aimed at suppressing local culture but a natural consequence of the removal of the centre of decision-making from Egypt itself to the imperial court at Rome. Although a significant number of literary and medical papyri in Egyptian were produced by the temples of Tebtynis and Soknopaiou Nesos during the first and second cen-

<sup>35</sup> See especially **3.91**, **4.138**; for the Ptolemaic period, **2.5** etc. For the administration of justice in general, see Lewis (1983), ch. 9; specifically on the handling of petitions, Haensch (1994).

<sup>36</sup> See **Ch.3 Arch. E** for the correspondence between the strategos Apollonios and his family. <sup>37</sup> See Burkhalter (1990a) with further references, and Haensch (1992).

<sup>38</sup> **3.70**, cf. **71**; **4.136**, **140**; **6.270**.

turies AD, this has been seen as a kind of ‘Indian summer’ for the priests, keen to preserve Egyptian writings in face of threatened extinction of the traditional culture.<sup>39</sup> By the end of the third century, a new form of written Egyptian had been devised, using a modified version of the Greek alphabet; but this Coptic script was initially confined to Biblical texts and private letters mostly from monastic or ecclesiastical contexts; only centuries later was its use extended to legal documents.

Literacy in Greek was, as the documents in this collection make clear, an accomplishment possessed by some (particularly upper-class) women, although one to be boasted about, rather than taken for granted.<sup>40</sup> Even among men, the ability to write clearly tails off rapidly as we look down the social scale: tenant farmers, for instance, were often unable to sign their names at the bottom of their leases. It is important to remember that the different contexts in which writing was employed made different demands on the writers’ competence: from the scholars of the Alexandrian Museum, whose annotations on literary works were preserved on the rubbish-heaps of Oxyrhynchos, to the ‘slow writers’ who with difficulty appended clumsy signatures to documents whose official or legal jargon they may or may not have comprehended. It was normal for even fluent writers to use a scribe to draw up the body of documents, and even letters, adding their ‘subscription’ (authentication and signature) at the end. It is perhaps surprising that even men or women who could not read might apparently use written communication on a regular basis.

The third century AD, often labelled a period of ‘crisis’ and decline in the Roman empire, in Egypt paradoxically appears to mark the full development of the *metropoleis* as prosperous, hellenised cities, their upper classes competing for prestige with conspicuous generosity, the ‘euergetism’ which in cities of the other eastern provinces reached its apogee somewhat earlier. For example, the wealthy landowner Aurelius Horion gained permission from Septimius Severus to provide a benefaction funding annual gymnastic contests for young men in Oxyrhynchos, and to support the impoverished villages of the nome, where he and his sons owned estates. Some fifty years later, his granddaughter Calpurnia Herakleia alias Eudamia was herself an extremely wealthy landowner; but the texts which mention her hint both at wider economic problems and administrative efforts to relieve them.<sup>41</sup>

Papyri from the mid-third century show several attempts at administrative change, with the eclipse of some older procedures and officials, and the introduction of new ones, such as the replacement of *sitologoi* by *dekaprotai* to oversee the grain collection. But throughout the half-century from the

<sup>39</sup> See further on Egyptian language and the temples, Bagnall (1993a), 235ff., 261ff., with further references, especially to Zauzich (1983) and Tait (1992); see also Lewis (1993).

<sup>40</sup> More detail in **Ch.6 Sect. II** introduction.

<sup>41</sup> A grain shortage, and inadequate inundation: **5.174**. Horion’s benefactions: *P. Oxy.* iv 705; cf. Bowman (1992). On third-century Egypt generally, see Johnson (1950).

death of Severus Alexander in 235 to the accession of Diocletian in 284, the rapid turn-over of emperors, the appearance of rivals controlling parts of the empire, and threats from external enemies, especially Sassanid Persia, gravely undermined all efforts to improve administrative efficiency and continuity. From 270, Egypt was briefly in the sphere of the Palmyrene dynasts Zenobia and her son Vaballathus, until recovered by Aurelian in 272. The frequent changes of ruler occasionally posed difficulties for scribes, who dated documents by the regnal year of the reigning emperor, but everyday life in Egypt was not severely affected. Like the earlier Roman civil wars (AD 68–9, 193–4) the political upheavals of the third century caused less disruption for the population of Egypt than the domestic conflicts of the Ptolemaic royal house had done.

Similarly, for most Egyptians, the economic effects of currency depreciation and price rises appear to have been less drastic than a modern reader might expect, since much wealth was held in land or grain stocks rather than deposits of money (cf. **5.175**). A sharp rise in prices occurred around 274/5, after a progressive depreciation of the silver coinage since the Severan period which left the currency with virtually no silver content at all. This primarily affected the government, which responded by adding requisitions in kind to supplement its money taxes. Despite attempts at currency reform by both Aurelian and Diocletian, price inflation in the debased coin grew more severe through the fourth century, although Diocletian succeeded in introducing a stable (because quite pure) gold currency, based on the *aureus* or *solidus*.<sup>42</sup> Diocletian also carried out an empire-wide reorganisation of tax assessment. In Egypt the complex system of land ‘categories’ which had previously formed the basis for the taxation of land (see **Ch.5 Sect. I** introduction) was replaced by a simpler categorisation of land into ‘private’ or ‘public’ (both now in fact in private ownership; the ‘public’ land merely paid a higher rate of tax), ‘productive’ and ‘unproductive’.

Diocletian successfully restored political stability to the empire, although his particular solution for a ‘tetrarchy’, consisting of two senior emperors (Augusti) assisted by two juniors (Caesars), did not long outlast him. His retirement in 305 precipitated a struggle among his successors from which Constantine ultimately emerged with sole power.

The reigns of Diocletian and Constantine undoubtedly mark a major watershed in the history of both Egypt and the empire more generally, not only transforming the administrative structures and tying Egypt more closely to the centres of imperial power (especially following the foundation of Constantinople), but also having a fundamental impact on the religious life of the country. Administratively, Diocletian initiated a series of experiments in sub-dividing Egypt into two (later more) provinces.<sup>43</sup> Local

<sup>42</sup> Rathbone (1996); Bagnall (1993a), 330f.

<sup>43</sup> Bagnall (1993a), 63f. summarises the details.

administration was also transformed: each nome was now governed by its main city (the old *metropolis*), under the *logistes* (*curator civitatis* in Latin) assisted by the *exactor* (replacing the old *strategos*) and other officials, all drawn from the local curial class, the city councillors, rather than from outside the nome as before. From 307, the toparchies into which nomes had been divided were replaced by smaller *pagi*, each under a *praepositus pagi*, also drawn from the curial class, answerable to the *logistes*.<sup>44</sup>

The Christianisation of Egypt involved more than a profound change of mentality; it created a new system of institutions and power structures in place of the traditional temples and priesthood, whose role was already much diminished from that in the Ptolemaic period and earlier. The changed mentality was in fact not confined to Christians, but embraced both pagan and Christian in an intellectual transformation which introduced personal belief alongside ritual activity as the defining features of religious adherence. The difficulty of estimating the extent and spread of Christianity in Egypt arises not only because the intermittent persecutions (under Decius,<sup>45</sup> Valerian, and especially the Great Persecution of Diocletian from 303) did not encourage Christians to publicise their faith, but also because in the second and third centuries both personal names and expressions (particularly reference to ‘god’ in the singular) which we might regard as distinctively Christian were shared, not only with Jews, but even with pagans (see **Ch.3 Arch. K**).

Imperial persecution of Christians ceased in 311, and Constantine (in the ‘Edict of Milan’, 313) restored property rights and status to the Church, later giving positive encouragement to Church building and privileges to the clergy. Thus the institutional structures of the Church, which had already achieved considerable sophistication over three centuries, were further enhanced, forming an organisation parallel to that of the civil authorities. Indeed, the power of the Bishop (later Patriarch) of Alexandria was both more extensive and more concentrated than that of a contemporary provincial governor, with almost one hundred bishops and an increasing number of village clergy (presbyters and deacons) directly dependent on him.<sup>46</sup>

The rapid spread of Christianity in the fourth century opened up new activities and opportunities for both men and women in Egypt, as well as new ways of talking about gender roles, sexuality and the body. Christian hagiographical works provide exemplars of female continence, both sexual and dietary; control of the body through fasting offered women an opportunity for extreme renunciation, equivalent to that of the male hermits in their desert cells.<sup>47</sup> Such texts, while undoubtedly valuable as a supplement to what little the papyri offer on attitudes to the body, must be read care-

<sup>44</sup> See further Bagnall (1993a), 54–62. <sup>45</sup> See 2.52–3.

<sup>46</sup> Bagnall (1993a), 283–7; Bowman (1986), 48.

<sup>47</sup> See Brown (1988), ch. 13; cf. chs. 11–12.

fully, as constituting a discourse with its own conventions and limitations. While Christianity unquestionably did have a general impact on attitudes to marriage (see especially **4.152–5**, **157–8**), renunciation, whether of sex, food, or possessions, was clearly not an aspiration widespread among the population at large. Many of the growing number of coenobitic monks and nuns (i.e. those living in monastic communities) retained close links with their families and villages, where they even continued to own property and to be involved in property transactions. Although monastic life to some degree provided an alternative focus to family loyalties, monasteries were not isolated institutions, set far into the desert, but were often perched beside towns and villages on the desert edge, fully integrated into the life of their locality.<sup>48</sup>

On the death of Theodosius I in 395, the link between Egypt and Rome was definitively broken, with the division of the empire between Arcadius, ruling the east from Constantinople, and Honorius, who ruled the west. Egypt's relationship with Constantinople was somewhat ambivalent: on the one hand, Constantinople had displaced Alexandria as the greatest city of the eastern Mediterranean, but it did give prominent Egyptians the opportunity (as Rome had scarcely done) to pursue political careers at the centre of imperial power. The Apions, a great landowning family from sixth-century Oxyrhynchus, are a notable example. Doctrinal disputes within the Church provided a focus for Egypt to assert its identity against central authority, first over the Nestorian controversy, and then over the monophysite doctrine (the belief that Christ had a single, composite, nature, both divine and human). Despite condemnation at the Council of Chalcedon in 451, the Coptic Church remained steadfastly monophysite, and became involved in a prolonged struggle with the Chalcedonians for control over the Patriarchy of Alexandria.

Landed wealth in Egypt seems to have become progressively more polarised throughout the Roman period and late antiquity. But our evidence for this is complicated by the fact that, certainly by the sixth century, the great 'Houses' (*oikoi* in Greek) whether imperial, ecclesiastical or private, held responsibility, not only for the tax payments of their own tenants and workers, but more generally for tax collection and similar areas of 'public administration'.<sup>49</sup> Thus evidence for the 'private' economic activities of these Houses is difficult to distinguish from their public duties. Nevertheless, their enormous wealth, and influence over whole localities, seem undeniable. At the same time, small and medium-sized properties certainly continued to exist, well-documented for instance in Aphrodite in the Antaiopolite nome (e.g. **3.116**, **5.197**), a village which had been granted the right to pay its own taxes direct to the imperial government.

<sup>48</sup> On monasticism, see further Rousseau (1985).

<sup>49</sup> Gascou (1985), briefly summarised by Bagnall (1993a), 159f.

In 619, the Persians under Chosroes II invaded Egypt, and held it until expelled by the emperor Heraclius in 628. Even more momentous events followed. Within a decade of the prophet Mohammed's death in 632, the Arabs had destroyed the Sassanid Persian empire and taken control of both Syria and Egypt from the Byzantines. The Arab conquest was undoubtedly a major turning-point in Egypt's political and religious history, making it a province of the Caliphate. But the treaty of surrender, signed in November 641, and departure of the last Byzantine troops the following year, did not bring an immediate transformation to many aspects of life. Christians remained free to practise their faith, and continued to use Coptic (or sometimes Greek) for their documents, the last examples of a hybrid legal tradition now over a millennium old. The wealth of seventh- and eighth-century Coptic documents from Jeme, opposite Thebes, provides the latest evidence included in this volume. The sources available for exploring the lives of women in Egypt through later centuries are written in Arabic, and reflect the increasing influence of Islam.<sup>50</sup>

### 3. The nature of the source material

Ancient Egypt owes the richness of its material remains to a combination of two factors: a dry climate which has preserved in excellent condition all forms of organic material lying above the water table of the valley, and a cultural preoccupation with both physical preservation and record-keeping. The survival of the written and other material on which this book draws is thus only in part a random process, and if we are to draw legitimate historical conclusions from it, we must be aware of the reasons for, and contexts of, its survival. The rest of the chapter therefore comprises a brief survey of the characteristics of the various types of evidence, starting with the written evidence on papyrus and other materials. It deserves emphasis here that, although much of this was written by men, referring to women or on their behalf, some of these texts were actually written by women themselves; rarely can historians gain similarly unmediated access to women in the ancient world. This chapter concludes with a look at the material evidence from funerary and other contexts.

Our main perspective on the social history of Greek and Roman Egypt comes from the papyrus documents which have survived in literally hundreds of thousands. The papyrus plant, *cyperus papyrus*, although not confined to Egypt, grew in particular abundance there, thriving in the marshes of the Delta and the Arsinoite nome. The writing material was made from the triangular stems, growing up to ten feet tall and topped with a tuft of grass-like leaves. The stems were sliced vertically into strips and laid

<sup>50</sup> See for example Keddie and Baron (1991), and Walther (1981).



alongside each other, a second layer of strips was placed crosswise on top of the first, and the two layers subjected to pressure, so that the plant's natural sap bound them together into sheets. The resulting paper, which was originally quite white in colour, flexible, and durable, was sold in rolls made by glueing together about twenty sheets; individual users would then cut off portions to suit their needs, or could glue rolls together to make longer ones.<sup>51</sup>

Books were written on papyrus rolls throughout the Greek and Roman world until superseded by the codex (of papyrus or parchment) in late antiquity. In Egypt papyrus was also extensively used, because of its ready availability, for many kinds of text, long or short, important or ephemeral, including legal contracts, administrative records, and even private letters. But it was not so cheap that there was no incentive to re-use sheets. Some of our most important discoveries of Greek literary works come from copies made on the backs of long rolls of obsolete tax lists taken home as 'waste paper' by high officials after their terms of office expired.<sup>52</sup> Papyrus was also re-used to make mummy-cases from cartonnage, a sort of papier mâché.

Because papyrus is organic matter, it can survive only where conditions are completely dry, or have allowed its preservation in other ways. Thus scarcely any papyri have been found in the Delta, except for some texts carbonised by fire at Tanis, Thmouis and Boubastos. This places a very severe limitation on our knowledge of Greek and Roman Egypt, since the Delta was clearly an extremely fertile and populous region. From Alexandria, we possess only a few documents preserved after being carried to other parts of Egypt, such as the group of legal documents found at Abusir el-Melek near the entrance to the Fayum (e.g. **4.127**). There is simply no basis for studying in detail the society and economy of Alexandria and its hinterland.

Even in the Nile valley, papyri have been recovered only in specific circumstances. The valley floor itself is too damp, and the continuous cultivation has in any case tended to destroy ancient sites. The debris of ancient settlement sites created raised mounds (*koms*), which in some cases have yielded significant numbers of papyri,<sup>53</sup> but our evidence comes mostly from the fringe of the desert, either from the ruins or rubbish dumps of ancient towns (notably Oxyrhynchos), or from the mummy cartonnage found in desert cemeteries. Ptolemaic papyri in particular are likely to come from mummy cartonnage, since even a site like Oxyrhynchos, now in the desert, has a water table too high to preserve any material from before the first century B.C. Similar considerations apply in the Fayum, where papyri (and other organic remains) survive primarily from the ring of village and

<sup>51</sup> On the plant and its use, see further Lewis (1974). On the form and survival of papyrus texts, Turner (1980). <sup>52</sup> Turner (1980), 90; see **4.138** introd.

<sup>53</sup> E.g. Hermopolis and Herakleopolis; also Arsinoe in the Fayum.

burial sites around the periphery which were abandoned to the desert in late antiquity and the early Islamic period, as the irrigation system which the early Ptolemies built to extend the cultivated area fell into disrepair.

Another important factor in the survival of papyri is the circumstance of their rediscovery. Egyptian papyri began to reach Europe in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, as part of the general market in antiquities, but from the 1880s there was a sudden explosion of interest, led specifically by the hope of discovering new classical and Biblical texts. Instead of relying for acquisition on what was brought to the antiquities market by the enterprise of local Egyptian peasants, European scholars began systematically to excavate sites known to be rich in papyri, with massive rewards: from their first season at Oxyrhynchos in 1897, Grenfell and Hunt returned to England with over 280 boxes of papyri, containing by their estimate about 300 literary items, 3000 documents in Greek, and a few in Latin, Coptic and Arabic.<sup>54</sup> To their credit, Grenfell and Hunt and their contemporaries energetically set about the scholarly publication of both the documentary and literary texts (although perhaps half the Greek documentary papyri recovered, and the vast majority of Demotic Egyptian papyri, still remain unpublished), and the new discipline of papyrology was invented, devoted to the technicalities of reading and interpreting these texts.

The early excavators (with the partial exception of Flinders Petrie) were not, however, so assiduous in keeping and publishing detailed records of their excavations, nor did they show great interest in the other archaeological material from their sites. They worked under great pressure of time, not least because the *sebakh* formed from ancient organic waste, in which the papyri were found, was being carted off in large quantities by local farmers as fertiliser. Even the ancient mud-bricks were taken for re-use, and the limestone inscriptions and facings of public buildings were rendered down for lime. When Petrie visited Oxyrhynchos in 1922, he found that a railway, originally intended to reach the Bahriya Oasis, was being used by the locals to denude the site of 100–150 tons of material every day. The unfortunate result is that we cannot now recover the detailed context from which many of the papyri were found, losing invaluable information about which particular texts were found together, and about any other objects found with them. The much more thorough and ‘scientific’ excavations of Soknopaiou Nesos and especially Karanis by the University of Michigan in the 1920s and 1930s shows what can be learnt from associating texts with their exact place of discovery (see **Ch.3 Arch. G and H**), although until very recently historians have been slow to exploit these advantages. Collections of documents relating to a single individual or family can be much more informative than single texts, but often these ‘archives’ were dispersed after excavation,

<sup>54</sup> Turner (1980) and (1982), both based on Grenfell and Hunt’s own excavation reports.

and papyrologists have had to reconstitute them laboriously. This book contains selections from a range of archives, particularly in Chapter 3, the introduction to which provides further explanation of their advantages and problems.

Papyrus was not the only writing material used in Greek and Roman Egypt. Ostraka (fragments of pottery), because of their cheapness and ready availability, were widely used for short ephemeral texts, such as tax receipts and letters, particularly in Upper Egypt, and in desert contexts such as the quarries of Mons Claudianus in the Eastern desert. Waxed wooden tablets are also occasionally found (3.70–1), while wooden identifying labels were often attached to mummies (6.279). Although Egypt is not as abundant in inscriptions as some areas of the Greek east, inscriptions are an important complement to the papyri in offering alternative perspectives. In particular, Greek inscriptions have survived from Alexandria and other places lacking in papyri, and they differ in nature and content from papyrus texts, often being intended for public display. They preserve some elaborate epitaphs (6.273–4; cf. 275–6, 2.26), as well as decrees and dedications. Egyptian hieroglyphs continued in use until the fourth century AD for inscriptions on the walls of temples and tombs.

Three extended accounts of Egypt have survived in the works of Greek authors; Herodotus (see above, p. 3), and Diodorus and Strabo (both first century BC). Although these accounts, and other allusions to Egyptian customs and religion in classical authors, tend to show a preoccupation with Egypt's strangeness in relation to their own world (a notable cultural phenomenon in itself), they do provide us with useful information on Egyptian culture and history. Allusions to Ptolemaic history are found not only in the historian Polybius (second century BC; 2.7), but also in Pausanias' 'Guidebook' to Greece from the second century AD (2.8); while the voluminous writer Plutarch (early second century AD) provides a famous account of Kleopatra (2.13–14; cf. 2.1) as well as an essay on Egyptian religion. Philo, an Alexandrian Jew (first century AD), is highly informative on contemporary relations between Greeks and Jews in Alexandria, and Roman policy towards them, while the Christian bishop Clement of Alexandria provides useful material on Alexandria in the late second century. Passages relevant to women's lives in Egypt can be derived from many other classical sources, from poetry to science; for, despite the assertions of 'otherness', Egypt was through the Alexandrian Museum and Library very much in the mainstream of classical intellectual culture, a mainstream reflected in the curriculum which schools throughout the chora zealously imparted to the youthful hellenised élites (see **Ch.6 Sect. II**). From the fourth century AD, a significant new source appears, the writings of the Desert Fathers, and Lives of holy men and women (the latter drawing on an earlier pagan tradition of martyr texts). All written sources, documentary

as much as literary or sub-literary texts, need to be read carefully, with sensitivity to their genre and context, but they permit a range of insights into the mental attitudes as well as the social circumstances of those for whom they were written.

The archaeological evidence can be surveyed more briefly, since some of the problems of early excavation in Egypt have already been mentioned. The dry conditions in which papyri survive preserve other organic matter equally well, including items of domestic and personal use like tools, combs, baskets or shoes. Petrie was one of the earliest archaeologists to appreciate the significance of such humble objects, and even Grenfell and Hunt did not entirely overlook them.<sup>55</sup> But only from Karanis (and recent excavations, like the Belgian excavations at El-Kab) do we have substantial numbers of household objects with the precise context of each one recorded.

Several of the best-preserved temples of Upper Egypt are constructions of the Ptolemaic and early Roman periods, including the temple of Isis at Philae, but we are less lucky with urban sites. Hermopolis is the only *metropolis* to have been effectively excavated, yielding significant insights into the hellenisation of its town centre in the Roman period.<sup>56</sup> Most of ancient Alexandria now lies either under modern building or under the sea, although recent excavations, both in one area of the modern city and underwater, are likely to add enormously to earlier knowledge derived from the underground necropoleis.<sup>57</sup>

Funerary contexts contribute much material evidence of Greek and Roman date (as for earlier periods), from the cemetery of Kom Abou Billou (ancient Terenouthis) in the Delta to Hawara and Er-Rubayyat in the Fayum, the source of many mummy portraits in Graeco-Roman style, to Tuna el-Gebel (the necropolis of Hermopolis) and sites like Akhmim (Panopolis) and Thebes which have produced mummies of the Ptolemaic and Roman periods.<sup>58</sup> Necropoleis were, of course, places of activity and employment for the living as well as repositories for the dead (sacred animals as well as humans), as we see most clearly at Saqqara.<sup>59</sup> But the interpretation of funerary evidence poses particular challenges; what exactly do the tombstones of Kom Abou Billou tell us of the beliefs of those who set them up? And what may be inferred from a mummy whose every surface (and that of the coffin too) is replete with symbolic decoration?

Material culture, no less than writing, needs to be 'read', and requires the interpreter to understand its symbolic language. The sheer bulk and range

<sup>55</sup> See e.g. Petrie (1889), cf. Drower (1985); *P. Fay.* plates (Grenfell and Hunt).

<sup>56</sup> Bailey (1991); note also the Italian excavations at Antinoe: *Antinoe (1965–1968): Missione Archaeologica in Egitto dell'Università di Roma* (Rome, 1974).

<sup>57</sup> See Breccia (1922); La Riche (1996).

<sup>58</sup> See especially Walker and Bierbrier (1997), Doxiadis (1995).

<sup>59</sup> D. J. Thompson (1988), 155–89.

of material evidence to survive from Greek and Roman Egypt, together with the intricacy and sophistication of the Egyptian iconographic tradition, modified in its latest stage to reflect the taste of a partially hellenised population, makes the interpretation of this culture a peculiarly daunting but fascinating occupation.